Interview with Wolfgang J. Lehmann

The Association for Diplomatic Studies and Training Foreign Affairs Oral History Project

WOLFGANG J. LEHMANN

Interviewed by: Robert Martens

Initial interview date: May 9, 1989

Q: Wolf Lehmann went to Vietnam in June 1973, initially as Consul General in the city of Can Tho, which is located in the Mekong Delta. He then went to Saigon in March 1974 as Deputy Chief of Mission to Ambassador Graham Martin. For frequent periods he was Charg# d' Affaires during that 13 months or so prior to the final fall of Saigon on April 30, 1975.

This period from the time that Mr. Lehmann arrived in Vietnam was one in which support for the war in the United States was declining. We were getting into the beginning of the second Nixon Administration. Watergate was opening severe wounds in the American body politic.

As time went on and as public support for the war declined, the difficulty of gaining material support from Congress for the South Vietnamese Government was increasing drastically, as well. This was a time, of course, when there were no American military forces in the country. These had long been withdrawn. This was a period when it was still hoped that somehow the South Vietnamese Government would be able to maintain its independence from the communist North Vietnam.

With that background, I believe we are in a position to begin the interview.

There were many opinions as to why South Vietnam—that is, the Republic of Vietnam—ceased to exist at the end of April 1975. Some people claim that the fate of Vietnam was sealed from the very moment that the Paris agreements were signed in December 1972 over the strong objections of President Thieu, and that all that really remained was the so-called decent interval before the end. Do you agree with that view?

LEHMANN: I think the Paris accords were severely deficient in several respects, but I don't agree that with the signing of the accords the end was preordained to be what it eventually came to be at the end of April 1975.

The agreement was, indeed, deficient, in certainly two major respects, the most important of which was that it allowed the North Vietnamese Army to remain in South Vietnam.

Another deficiency was the fiction that there existed something called the PRG, the People's Revolutionary Government of South Vietnam, and that we accepted the notion that this fictitious entity was a legitimate party to the Paris agreements. That, incidentally, is why we at the embassy, whenever we had to refer to the PRG, we always put it in quotes. We never let it stand on its own as we would for the DRV, which was the formal official title of North Vietnam.

Hanoi certainly considered the Paris accords to be a victory for them and publicly said so after the fall of South Vietnam. Nevertheless, I don't believe that the end was inevitable. Everything depended on whether the United States and South Vietnam were able and willing—and I want to underscore “willing”—and primarily the United States, would insist that the agreement be carried out as written.

It was particularly important that the United States show willingness to back up that insistence with some sort of force if that should become necessary. That would not necessarily have meant the re-introduction of American ground forces, but certainly the

possible reintroduction of American air power was a factor in the background. Of course, that did not come to be.

Immediately after the Paris agreements went into effect, Congress, at the initiative of Senator Church, prohibited the reintroduction of U.S. combat forces into Vietnam. That bit of Congressional myopia—or worse—left us very little leverage to insist that Hanoi honor the terms of the agreement. In fact, our aid to the Republic of Vietnam, both military and economic, was progressively reduced very soon after the agreements came into effect, and U.S. intervention, of course, became increasingly remote as a political crisis developed in Washington, a crisis that eventually led to the Nixon resignation.

Q: I believe that, on the other hand, Soviet and Chinese aid was continuing, or at least Soviet aid. Could you comment on the extent of that support and the contrast between that flow of communist aid to North Vietnam and the decrease in aid by the United States to the Republic of South Vietnam?

LEHMANN: Both Soviet and Chinese, especially Soviet aid, was continuing at a very heavy pace. The agreement had a provision in it that both sides could replace military items—ammunition, hardware etc.—on a one-for-one basis in South Vietnam. We never did that, because we never had adequate budgetary facilities to actually replace military items lost by the South Vietnamese during that sort of lower-intensity period of conflict that went on in 1973 and 1974. Moreover, the restriction did not apply to North Vietnam.

There was absolutely no way of ensuring the other side's compliance with that particular provision. It was simply disregarded. Hanoi did not permit the ICCS—the International Commission for Control and Supervision—to exercise its authority in that regard even if it had wanted to. Hanoi did not agree to the requirement, also stipulated in the Paris agreements, that there should be established certain entry points through which this one-for-one replacement of ammunition and other military items would be monitored. So these were never established, except on our side.

Q: There may well have been two or three times as much as the authorized one-for-one level coming in, for all anyone knows, at least more than the mere replacement flow of materiel.

LEHMANN: Oh, it was far more than that. The magnitude of the amount of ammunition, military equipment, trucks and weapons was even alluded to by General Van Tien Dung, who was the North Vietnamese commander who eventually conquered the South. When you read his account, which was first published in Nhan Dan, the Hanoi newspaper, in serial fashion and later as a book, when you read his account, he speaks of thousands of trucks and guns being moved to the South on the Ho Chi Minh Trail Network. No, it was never honored at all by them.

Q: Going back to the broader course of the war and the situation in both Washington and Asia, you've been quoted as saying that the reason why the war ended in a North Vietnamese military victory at the time it did—that is in April 1975—was Watergate. Would you comment further on that?

LEHMANN: Hanoi, of course, had never given up the idea of eventually conquering the South. As far as they were concerned, it was a question as to when and how. We knew there were differences of opinion in the Hanoi leadership during the period of 1973 and well into 1974 as to what should be given priority. The question that was facing them at the time—and we had a fairly good reading on that from our admittedly fragmentary intelligence, but a fairly good capacity for making an accurate estimate—the question facing them was whether they should divert resources to deal with their serious, domestic internal problems, and put eventual unification of the country under their control on a longer term basis—Asiatics think in long terms, very long terms—or whether they should go for broke quickly and force an early solution. They had quite an argument about that.

President Nixon resigned in early August of 1974. That was followed within a week by a drastic reduction of U.S. military assistance to South Vietnam, mandated by Congress.

In fact, the vote that reduced the amount down to $700 million, which was less than half of what we had been using earlier, and much of that $700 million wasn't really available, a point I will elaborate on later on, that vote was preceded by a vote on a resolution that all military aid to South Vietnam should be cut off. And 26 members of the United States Senate voted to cut off all aid immediately. These were the facts that led to a decision by the Hanoi leadership to undertake a large-scale massive offensive operation in 1975 in an effort to end the war on their terms.

Q: And take advantage of this situation?

LEHMANN: Hanoi's decision was based on its evaluation of the political situation in the United States. They concluded, that given the political situation in Washington resulting from the Watergate crisis, the United States would not effectively interevene. At the embassy in Saigon, in a message that I sent to Washington as Charg# at the time, on August 13, 1974, we said that what had been happening in Washington—primarily in the form of the drastic reduction of military assistance to South Vietnam— would lead to a political decision by Hanoi to make an all out military effort to conquer the South. And we were quite correct in that estimate.

Q: You certainly were.

LEHMANN: As far as we were able to ascertain, the decision must have been made in early September of 1974. Subsequently, General Dung, in his account called The Great Spring Victory, confirmed publicly after the end of the war that the decision was made about that time and was ratified by a meeting of the Political Bureau and the Central Military Party Committee in North Vietnam in early October. So the full scenario which led to the political decision by Hanoi in early fall 1974 to make an all out military effort in early 1975 was precipitated by the political crisis in the United States in the summer of 1974.

Q: Was there any reaction to your message?

LEHMANN: No, nor, being cynical did I really expect any. Our message began with a summarized assessment of hte military situation we were in because of the reduction in the DAV Program. General John Murray, who was the Defense Attach# at the time, worked out that part for me and sent it in in greater detail to the Pentagon. On the technical side there were some interesting points, including the fact that we thought the Vietnam program was being double charged for the procurement of F-5 aircraft for the Vietnamese Air Force and that the American military services had a habit of charging large amounts of the appropriation to overhead costs, usually designated as PCH and T —which stands for packing, crating, handling and transportation— leaving little for guns, bullets and training. But, the really important part of the message was that what Congress was doing was to signal to Hanoi that it could proceed with a military option to win the war and that the United States did not have the will to stand in its way.

Q: You mentioned that there was a conference in Hanoi during which the decision was ratified to enter into an all-out offensive against the South and try to complete the conquest. Did you find any further confirmation of that as time went on?

LEHMANN: We did, but only after General Dung published the piece I referred to before. That account includes a very interesting statement on how important Hanoi's appraisal of the political situation in Washington was in its decision-making process. It's a very revealing statement. He says, “The internal contradictions of the U.S. administration and among political parties had intensified. The Watergate scandal had seriously affected the entire United States and precipitated the resignation of an extremely reactionary President—Nixon. The United States faced economic recession, mounting inflation, serious unemployment and an oil crisis. Also, the U.S. allies were not on good terms with the United States. U.S. aid to the Saigon puppet administration was decreasing.” Then he goes on to say—and quotes from the resolution that was adopted by that particular conference, which says, “Having already withdrawn from the South, the United States

could hardly jump back in, and no matter how it might intervene, it would be unable to save the Saigon administration from collapse."

There are numerous other references in this account illustrating just how decisively the political crisis in the U.S. figured in the North Vietnamese decision-making process.

Q: Are you saying, in effect, then, that if it had not been for Watergate, the South Vietnamese regime would have survived, and South Vietnam would exist today as an independent country?

LEHMANN: Not necessarily. What I'm saying is the outcome would not have been what it was at the time that it took place. Certainly, that South Vietnam would have survived as an independent entity is within the realm of possibility, but no more than that. So all I'm really saying is you would not have seen that particular outcome at that particular time at the end of April 1975 that we did see. It would have been something different.

Q: You mentioned earlier that the Soviet Union and, to a lesser extent, I suppose, China was continuing to supply the North Vietnamese forces at a very high rate, in spite of the fall-off in support by the United States. Can you talk a little bit about the Soviet role more generally, in addition to the supply issue? Did the Soviet Union have an effect on the North Vietnamese decision-making process, for example?

LEHMANN: Oh, it certainly did. I don't think there is any question about that. There was historical precedent for that. In the spring of 1972, about a week before the North Vietnamese Easter Offensive kicked off in an earlier phase of the war, a large Soviet mission, headed by the then-Soviet Deputy Defense Minister, Mr. Vapiski, visited Hanoi. They played a role in the decision on that particular operation. There was a repeat of that in 1974, when the Soviet Deputy Chief of Staff, General Kulikov, who later became the Warsaw Pact commander in Europe headed a very large mission to Hanoi about a week or so before Christmas 1974. That followed an earlier trip by a big North Vietnamese military delegation to Moscow in November. Now, Kulikov didn't come to Hanoi to sing

Christmas carols in the streets of the city, a phrase, incidentally, I put into a cable I sent at the time on that particular event. It was obvious that Kulikov came to Hanoi with that delegation to wrap up final details regarding the decision to proceed with the offensive which had reached the point of no return, and to wrap up arrangements for Soviet military assistance and support of the operation.

It is ironical that these events should be taking place at about the very time that President Ford and Secretary Kissinger met with the Russians at Vladivostok, in November, at about the time when the North Vietnamese military delegation visited Moscow and about a month before Kulikov reciprocated the visit with his delegation to Hanoi. One of the things that has always troubled me is that the word “Vietnam” was not mentioned by anybody at the Vladivostok summit meeting.

Q: You discussed the Soviet role. The Chinese role was less important, obviously. But I recall from my own time in INR a few years earlier that the Chinese, during the height of the Cultural Revolution, had interfered with the transit of Soviet supplies by rail overland to Vietnam. Can you comment on the way in which the Chinese were trying to counter Soviet influence by providing supplies of their own, the extent to which they might have been hindering the Soviets, and the degree to which the Soviets were bringing in supplies both overland and by other means, say by ship, to Haiphong or by air?

LEHMANN: Most military and other AID reached North Vietnam by ship and air, rather than overland. As near as we could tell, the Chinese were in somewhat of a quandary. On one hand, as you remarked, they wanted to preserve influence in Hanoi. On the other hand, they were quite disturbed by the situation. I believe, but do not recall for certain, that some Soviet items reached North Vietnam overland, but only after much delay. In the middle of 1974 the Chinese suddenly grabbed the South Vietnamese claimed Paracel Islands. That did not sit well either in Hanoi or Saigon.

Q: They were very much preoccupied with the Soviet threat on their northern border.

LEHMANN: That's correct. As to Vietnam, ideology said they should help the Socialist brethren but reality and history said the Vietnamese would be a problem. So, they decided to take advntage of the situation and enforce their claim to the Paracels.

Q: At one point you mentioned the International Commission for Control and Supervision, that is, the ICCS, and alluded to the fact that even if it had wanted to do something in regard to Soviet supplies, it probably couldn't, but the implication was that the ICCS probably didn't want to anyway. Do you want to comment a little bit further on the role of the ICCS? Mention what it is first. Some listeners might not realize its composition.

LEHMANN: The ICCS, the International Commission for Control and Supervision, was part of the Paris agreements. It was the kind of thing that Americans are generally fond of as a solution to problems. It had been tried in Indochina at an earlier stage. It hadn't worked then and didn't work in 1973 to 1975. It was composed originally of Canada, Indonesia, Poland, and Hungary.

The Canadians gave up when they saw that it couldn't work, that the North Vietnamese, the Poles and Hungarians wouldn't allow it to work. The Canadians left it in the fall of 1973. I was sorry to see them go, but I certainly didn't blame them for concluding that they would not be part of a farce.

In addition to being ineffective as a mechanism to enforce compliance with the Paris accords, the Hungarians and Poles - especially the Hungarians - played an intelligence role on behalf of North Vietnam. Regardless of whatever differences exist between the Hungarians and Poles on the one hand and the Soviet Union on the other, there is very little doubt that their intelligence and security services cooperate very closely with the Soviet intelligence and security services - they are almost part of it - and by extension, in this case, with North Vietnam.

One of the most embarrassing things I had to go through repeatedly was to urge the government of South Vietnam to pay its contribution to support the ICCS. It was ridiculous, but I suppose one of the things that the people in our business are called upon to do from time to time.

Q: Do you think there might be some lessons in this experience in regard to other places in the world, maybe Central America?

LEHMANN: I think if there's any lesson in it, the one I would immediately urge is, “Don't do it unless you are reasonably confident that the parties really wish to observe the terms of whatever they agreed to.” If there's no political will to abide by an agreement, a mechanism of this type cannot substitute for the absence of that will.

Q: Up to now, we've discussed the ending of the Vietnam War largely in terms of the lack of will in the United States, the effect of Watergate, and the subsequent changes in North Vietnamese strategies as Hanoi became more optimistic regarding the much lower degree of support that would be available to the South. Perhaps it's now time to shift to what the situation on the ground was within South Vietnam. And perhaps an area on which to begin would be the economic situation in the South.

LEHMANN: The economic situation in the South in the last two and some years, 1973-74 and early '75, and especially in the beginning, was certainly difficult, but also one in which the Vietnamese demonstrated extraordinary resilience. In 1973, the first year when the Paris agreements were in effect, the Vietnamese economy was hit by three developments. First, there were the economic repercussions of the withdrawal of all American forces from Vietnam. Those forces had, in a sense, been a boost to the economy by virtue of the money that the people spent in the country. It was largely eliminated by late 1972 and nonexistant from 1973 on. Second, there was the world-wide inflation, which drove up prices for the Vietnamese and cut down the purchasing value of every dollar of U.S.

economic assistance and the smaller non-American aid projects being carried out in the country.

Finally, there was the 1973 oil crisis and oil shock which brought sharp increases in petroleum prices. That, in turn, had effects on agriculture, on transportation, on such other industries like fishing, where you use motorboats. It also substantially reduced the value of every United States military assistance dollar that went into POL for the South Vietnamese forces.

By the end of 1973 and January 1974, the South Vietnamese economy had hit bottom. The curve began to flatten out early in 1974. There were dire predictions at one point that there would be a rice crisis in Saigon in late 1973 and 1974, which would lead to riots in the streets. That did not come off. The government managed the rice supply situation rather well, with some advice and assistance from us, but they managed it quite well.

By the fall of 1974, the agribusiness and rural credit system, which had been developed particularly in the Mekong Delta was operating very well. There was indeed a good prospect that Vietnam would regain self-sufficiency in rice in 1975, and certainly in 1976. In early 1975, just as full scale North Vietnamese military operations began to get under way, we could look forward to a small rice export surplus for South Vietnam, had it not been for the military situation.

Along with that, there were other developments. There was exploratory offshore drilling for oil, starting in early 1974, which rapidly showed that the prospects for commercially exploitable petroleum were very good indeed. In fact, those operations had progressed to the point where in January and February 1975 the major companies involved in those exploratory projects wanted to discuss production arrangements with the South Vietnamese Government. Of course, all of that came to nothing because of the military situation.

Q: We've talked about the internal economic situation in South Vietnam. Why don't we continue now to discuss the internal political situation.

LEHMANN: The government of President Thieu was politically quite stable. Compared to some previous experiences during earlier periods in Vietnam, including earlier periods of our involvement -especially after the U.S. supported 1962 coup against Ngho Diem - it was a model of stability. The picture created and systematically fostered by the well-organized and well-financed anti-Vietnam lobby in the United States was that of a despotic regime which brutally suppressed all legitimate political opposition and the press and engaged in wholesale arrests and detentions of what were alleged to be tens and hundreds of thousands of political prisoners. But of course, this was not true at all.

Certainly Vietnam, nor any other Asian country, can be expected to run a kind of New England-style town meeting democracy - especially in war time - which is what a lot of Americans think foreigners ought to do. What existed in South Vietnam at that time was a rather free-wheeling, open society, complete with good points and some that were not so good. For example, there were 26 newspapers in Saigon being published at that time—26—most of them utterly irresponsible. That was reduced to one after April 30, 1975, and it indeed was fully responsible and was printing only what it was told to print.

Q: Yes.

LEHMANN: Of course, there were people who didn't like President Thieu. There were dissidents whose importance in the South Vietnamese political picture was vastly exaggerated by their American supporters. The groups with some real political underpinnings were largely sectarian, and they supported the government in some ways and opposed or pressed their sectarian interests in others. They were groups like the Cao Dai, the Dai Viet, the Hoa Hao and various Buddhists. The other so called “dissidents” of whom American liberals were so fond, and in whom they professed to see hope for

“reconciliation” with the North, were usually people without any political base whatever. In some cases they were North Vietnamese or Viet Cong agents.

Q: Beyond the discussion of Thieu's position and stability, a lot of comments have been made in this country about the degree of corruption in South Vietnam. Was corruption as manifest as has been stated, and was it a factor that so severely weakened the South Vietnamese cause that there was not much hope for their being able to forestall the North Vietnamese?

LEHMANN: The answer to that, in short, is yes, there was some corruption in South Vietnam. There is corruption in many other countries. There is corruption in Vietnam today. Sometimes what we, according to our rules, call corruption is an accepted practice in Asia or other parts of the world where it doesn't necessarily go under that heading.

A wartime situation always exacerbates corruption to a certain extent. It did so in the United States in World War II. In Italy during World War II - I served there - truck loads, even convoy loads of military supplies such as food and gasoline disappeared into the black market at times.

In Vietnam, the fact that you had a war going on, even a relatively low intensity conflict in 1973 and most of 1974, didn't help the situation. But the notion that “corruption” in the South was the reason for North Vietnam's victory, or even a significant contributing factor, is sheer nonsense.

Q: Why don't we turn now to the South Vietnamese military. There is a picture in some quarters in this country that the South Vietnamese Army was really not very good. Corruption again is mentioned in this respect. It certainly did not have the reputation that the South Korean military had. The picture, if one goes back far enough, is of American troops having to do the whole thing in the days when we were involved, the South Vietnamese weren't so good.

On the other hand, there have been other reports to the contrary, that the South Vietnamese had built up their military, that they did have some very good troops.

What if the ammunition problem and the resupply problem had not been so difficult? What if the South Vietnamese had indeed been getting a steady stream of equipment and ammunition and supplies from the United States? Would they have been capable of sustaining themselves against the awesome North Vietnamese Army?

LEHMANN: The bottom line on that one is that the ARVN, as well as the Vietnamese Air Force and Navy, performed just about like other military forces including, incidentally, the ROKs during the Korean war. Some times the performance was very good, at times not so good and at others average. That, by the way is also the judgement of General Bruce Palmer in his book, “The 25 Year War.” The most professional, authoritative account of the military action from January 1973 to the end on April 30, 1975, including the ARVN's performance is contained in a publication of the U.S. Army's Center of Military History entitled “Vietnam from Cease-Fire to Capitulation” written by former Colonel Bill Le Gro who was with us in Vietnam during my entire tour there.

Over the years of “Vietnamization”, the South Vietnamese military had become increasingly capable of doing the job for themselves and confident of their ability to do so.

I go back now to the North Vietnamese Spring Offense, the so-called Easter Offensive, in 1972, the one I referred to earlier when talking about the Soviet role. There was very severe fighting in Military Region I, up around Quang Tri. Initially, the South Vietnamese were indeed driven back and defeated, but they managed to recover the position eventually. Admittedly, they did so with substantial American air support, but it was only American air support. The ground fighting was done by the South Vietnamese.

From that time on until the Paris agreements came into effect eight months later, virtually all the fighting, again with the occasional exception of U.S. air support, was done by the South Vietnamese and very effectively.

When the Paris agreements were about to come into effect in January of 1973, the North Vietnamese attempted a major land grabbing operation in an effort to get control of as much key territory as possible. A major event took place in the northern part of the Mekong Delta, when the North Vietnamese attacked and briefly occupied the town of Tan Chau, which is an active agricultural rural and commercial center close to the Cambodian border in the northern part of the Delta. Well, that effort was dealt with entirely by the South Vietnamese, who defeated the North Vietnamese and reoccupied all South Vietnamese territory in that area.

After the Paris agreements came into effect, in that period of low intensity conflict throughout 1973 and at least for the first nine months of 1974, the ARVN basically contained the enemy, which -in theory anyway - was all they were permitted to do. Occasionally the North Vietnamese would make a little headway and occasionally the South Vietnamese would make a little headway. One place, for example, that I'm personally very familiar with were the Seven Mountains, an area very close to the Cambodian border in the Delta where the North Vietnamese had garrisoned a fairly substantial force in very rough mountainous terrain honeycombed with caves. Well, eventually, the South Vietnamese Rangers just about completely destroyed them, taking quite heavy casualties themselves. There are many other examples of that kind.

Later on, when the full scale North Vietnamese offensive finally began, there were repeated instances, all the way close towards the end in late April 1975, notably at Xuan Loc, where the South Vietnamese Army fought with splendid courage and determination.

The North Vietnamese militarily defeated the South in 1975, not because the South Vietnamese were unable or unwilling to fight, but because Hanoi disposed overwhelming

military force, equipped with a panoply of modern weapons and transport, skillfully led with the aid of sophisticated command and control facilities and amply resupplied, in good part through Cambodia by courtesy of the U.S. Congress. In addition, the North Vietnamese had the advantage of the initiative. They could pick and choose and concentrate forces, while the South was forced to scatter its forces throughout the difficult topography from Quang Tri in the north to Ca Mau 800 miles to the south. Last, and by no means least, as the realization set in that they were being abandoned by the United States, the South Vietnamese military became increasingly demoralized.

Q: Because they were getting no support and were undercut by the United States?

LEHMANN: We shipped in a few artillery pieces and unloaded them with much publicity, but that was all too transparent as a ploy and made no impression at all on Hanoi. The all too evident reality was that Saigon was being undercut by the United States. There were certain things that happened at that late period that increased demoralization in the South by orders of magnitude. For example, sometime in March 1975, Senator Mathias brought in a resolution in the United States Senate calling for an immediate end to all further assistance of any kind to South Vietnam. That had a devastating psychological effect at a very late stage in the game. The Vietnamese, like many other foreigners, have some difficulty understanding our political system. All they could see was a Republican senator, allegedly on the side of the administration, bringing in that kind of resolution and coming at the very moment when the South Vietnamese were making their last attempt to try and save a truncated Republic of Vietnam. The Mathias Resolution was psychologically devastating.

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Q: This interview is being conducted to interview Wolf Lehmann concerning the last few months of the American presence in South Vietnam. Mr. Lehmann was deputy chief of mission during this period, as well, of course, as charg# d'affaires during the absences

of Ambassador Graham Martin. An earlier interview with Mr. Lehmann covered a longer period dating back to Mr. Lehmann's arrival in Vietnam in June of 1973 and was more of a broad perspective concerning his and the embassy's views of that entire period including analysis of the chain of events and policies that lead to the fall of South Vietnam. This interview, by contrast, covers the last month or two and focuses on the disaster itself and on the evacuation of Americans and others. The focus is on Mr. Lehmann's role and activities both as charg# and as deputy to the ambassador.Before beginning my questions, let me state several major background facts against which this interview plays. As for Mr. Lehmann himself, he was initial consul general in Can Tho from June of 1973 to March of 1974, and DCM from March of 1974 until his evacuation from the embassy roof on April 30, 1975. The other facts briefly are: the fall of Ban Me Thuot in the highlands on March 12; the beginning of the chain of North Vietnamese victories in the rapid, final intensive; retreat of the ARVN from the highlands over the next two weeks; the fall of Da Nang on the coast on March 30; rapid NVA advanced south; President Ky's resignation on April 22; encirclement and attacks on Saigon's perimeter on April 28-29; and completion of the U.S. evacuation on the morning of April 30. Other dates and events can be cited, but the above skeleton is stated as a guide to the listener in following this final story. It is a period of only six or seven weeks.

Mr. Lehmann, you were a charg# from March 2 until March 28, a period that coincides with the successful North Vietnamese offensive in the highlands. Why was Ambassador Martin away at this time?

LEHMANN: As you mentioned briefly, we had had a very large-scale and extensive visit by the large congressional delegation beginning about February 24 with Congressman McCloskey and Bartlett. This was followed by a delegation headed by Congressman Flynn which included about half a dozen others including such luminaries as Bella Abzug and Congressman Fraser, who is the present mayor of Minneapolis. That delegation, which was a sort of last effort to secure some congressional support for what the President and the Executive Branch wanted to do, left late on the evening of Sunday, March 2,

and Ambassador Martin left along with them to return to Washington. His main purpose in going back to Washington was to do what he possibly could in a last effort to try and salvage something out of the Vietnam situation.

Q: How unexpected was the fall of Ban Me Thuot and also President Ky's quick decision after that to withdraw from the highlands?

LEHMANN: First, it is significant to note that, while the congressional delegation that I mentioned was in the country, the North Vietnamese had in fact stood down their offensive operations. The military situation during the entire stay of that delegation was quiescent. The North Vietnamese offensive operations resumed two days after the congressional delegation left on March 4, 1975. The main effort of the new NVA offensive was in the central highlands. It involved not only Ban Me Thuot incidentally, but also Pleiku and Kontum which are somewhat farther north than the highlands.

As far as the operation towards Ban Me Thuot was concerned, it was extremely competently done by the North Vietnamese. Their security was excellent and the sudden attack on Ban Me Thuot itself came as a considerable surprise, especially as to the force behind the attack to both the Vietnamese and ourselves.

Q: Were any Americans or foreigners in Ban Me Thuot when this attack came?

LEHMANN: Yes. We had our provincial representative, an AID officer named Paul Struharik, in Ban Me Thuot at the time. There were also a few other foreigners. I believe there were one or two Canadians and perhaps an Australian in addition, incidentally, to the ICCS detachment which consisted solely of a Hungarian and a Pole and none of the others. As I mentioned, the rapidity with which the attack on Ban Me Thuot itself took place did take everybody by some surprise, and the people I mentioned, including Struharik, were captured by the North Vietnamese. It took us several weeks, but the ICCS eventually

affected the return of Struharik as well as the other foreigners there. What happened to the Pole and Hungarian I don't know. I presume they joined their friends.

Q: You mentioned that there were also North Vietnamese attacks on places further north in the highlands, notably Pleiku and Kontum. What was happening there?

LEHMANN: The North Vietnamese operations of that area were also within days after the congressional delegation left. Pleiku and Kontum—places where we had Americans—were, of course, increasingly in danger. We, for our part, did not want to take precipitant action, however, in moving both our American employees and our Vietnamese employees that we had there out too early because we did not want to be responsible for setting off panic and a change of events that would no longer be controlled. However, on Saturday, March 15, within about thirty minutes after I had returned from a meeting with President Ky at the palace, it became obvious from reports that I had from Consul General Monty Spear in Nha Trang and other information that we had at the embassy that we needed to get our people out of Pleiku and Kontum. Therefore, that morning I instructed Jacobson, our special assistant for field operations, and Spear in Nha Trang to remove our people immediately from both places, and that operation was completed before the day was out.

Incidentally, as far as Washington was concerned, all I did is inform Washington that I had directed the evacuation and it would be completed before the end of a day. I did not ask them for any permission.

Q: Did they comment?

LEHMANN: They made no comment.

Q: Wasn't there an ICCS group somewhere in the area as well? Did he take any action regarding them?

LEHMANN: Yes. There was an ICCS group. It consisted at that time only of Hungarians and Poles. It did not have any Indonesians or Iranian representatives in that particular location. The question of whether we should warn the ICCS group or not was raised in the embassy with me. After giving it some thought, I decided that no warning to the Hungarians and Poles was indicated, to just let them sit there and do the best they can when their friends would arrive.

Q: They presumably were getting better information than you were anyway, maybe.

LEHMANN: Perhaps they were.

Q: I understand that, on the basis of the sudden North Vietnamese successes in the highlands, particularly at Ban Me Thuot, President Thieu decided as early as Friday, March 14, that a total retreat out of the highlands would be necessary in order to shorten lines, particularly in view of the fact that American material and ammunition was no longer forthcoming. That was on March 14. You just mentioned that you met with President Thieu on the morning of Saturday, March 15, at nine o'clock. Did President Thieu say anything to you at that time concerning this decision?

LEHMANN: That's quite correct. The decision to withdraw from the highlands—in fact, the decision to withdraw from most of the northern part of the Republic of Vietnam—was made by Thieu and conveyed to his corps commander on Friday at a meeting in Nha Trang on March 14. When I met with President Thieu at nine o'clock the following Saturday morning, he did not directly inform me of that decision, but he hinted that a major decision was in the process of being made and that it had been a rather difficult one. I could not draw him out on the details. However, what he did say set a slight alarm bell ringing in my head as I left the palace and returned to the embassy. It was on my return that I was informed by Consul General Spear in Nha Trang that Two Corps had decided to evacuate its forward headquarters at Pleiku and at Kontum. That, in turn, precipitated my decision then to immediately evacuate the Americans and Vietnamese employees that we had in the area.

Q: Did you assume that the word from Consul General Spear connected with the incident President Thieu had just given?

LEHMANN: Yes, I did. I might add something here. The question is sometimes raised whether that was a proper way for a president to deal with us and whether I was not considerably annoyed by the fact that he had not directly and clearly conveyed this decision to me that Saturday morning. My feeling about that is that, in light of the fact that we were letting the whole side down, he had a right to make his own decisions. Since we were nevertheless able to do what we had to do with regard to our own people and our own employees, there was no cause for me to be particularly resentful by that particular mission on the part of the president.

Q: There have been criticisms of the Thieu decision to withdraw. I won't go into that in any detail since we have covered that in our earlier interview—covered that as the South Vietnamese belief that it cannot hold all of South Vietnam given the cutoff of United States material and ammunition. But, there have also been many criticisms of a more tactical nature on the disastrous retreat from Pleiku down to the coast and the alleged incompetence and irresponsibilities of Vietnamese generals. Do you believe that better preparation, including perhaps better briefing by President Thieu of his generals, would have made a significant difference?

LEHMANN: It might and might not have. There is no doubt about the fact that the decision was made very rapidly and implemented without any adequate preparation. On the other hand, if Thieu had left more preparation time between decision day and implementation day, there was a very, very strong chance, if not a likelihood, that all of this would have leaked promptly to the North Vietnamese through their very extensive intelligence apparatus that they maintained. I do not know the answer to the question of whether better preparations would have resulted in a more effective operation or not.

As it was, and as you said, there was little if any preparation. The whole move was set in motion literally from one day to the next almost from hour to hour. It involved not only the withdrawal of South Vietnamese troops but in many cases their families and, of course, endless numbers of other civilian refugees who also clogged the very limited roads and highways that led from the highlands down to the coast. So that was one of the elements that made it a very difficult operation.

The second element that made it a disaster or a near disaster was the inadequate state of the single road, Route 7B, that led to the coast and along which the withdrawal took place. The road was in bad shape. It was inadequate. There were places where bridges were missing and had to be reconstructed by engineers all of which took time. Meanwhile, all this traffic consisting of masses of withdrawing troop as well as masses of refugees was backed up. Clearly, had there been good plans and preparations, it would have included getting that road in shape and getting it secured.

Then there was a third element and that was the very highly sophisticated and excellent command control and intelligence system over which the North Vietnamese disposed in their attack. Contrary to popular impressions in this country, this was not a guerilla war. This was a main force war in which the North Vietnamese not only had excellent intelligence but excellent command and control communications. So they were able to observe all this, come to very rapid conclusions as to the state of the South Vietnamese forces, and take very effective military action in order to largely destroy those forces as they were deploying to the coast.

Q: We cannot affect the issue from the standpoint of material and U. S. assistance since that had already been denied from Washington. Was there anything we did not do that we might have done to influence South Vietnamese decision making? I'm thinking here not so much of Washington but U. N. Ambassador Martin primarily. Would Thieu have listened to you?

LEHMANN: I think the first answer to that question is that we were certainly in no position whatsoever to advise Thieu to make another decision rather than the one that he did make to in effect evacuate the entire northern part of the Republic of South Vietnam and attempt to hold a truncated South Vietnam along the line running roughly from Da Lat to the coast in the east. Would he have listened to us had we done so? I rather doubt it, but as I say we were in no position to give any advice.

There is one other point that ought to be made. The concept of trying to hold militarily a truncated South Vietnam along the line that I just mentioned from Da Lat to the coast was not one that was invented at that particular moment. That idea had been raised years earlier and it had occasionally been pressed by an Australian advisor to President Thieu.

Q: I think I know who that was.

LEHMANN: Yes. Desmond. So it was not a totally new thing.

Q: Let's switch now to embassy evacuation planning, organization, and morale. How good was the basic embassy E & E plan and also the plans of the four consulate generals? To what degree had they been updated to take into account the possibility of a sudden South Vietnamese collapse? It must have appeared increasingly likely as the perceived U. S. abandonment of its ally became clear. I am referring not just to the detailed written plan but to the very consultations between you and respective consul generals and also with the leading embassy players.

LEHMANN: I think the basic embassy evacuation plans were sound, in effect, in fact. We'll get to that later with the final helicopter rotary wing lift out of Saigon was option four on the embassy's evacuation plan. Other options in the plan were in general outline a while earlier. The evacuation plans are, of course, normally kept under more or less constant review. That review was intensified in our case early in 1975. As early as February 20, we had a couple of Marine colonels come in from the military side which was to support

the evacuation in order to review the details for evacuation planning right on the ground and make any necessary adjustments that might be made. Of course, at that stage of the game, we kept this very, very quiet. We did not tell anybody—didn't want to tell anybody—for reasons which are obvious. We can get into them—

Q: And you didn't want to demoralize the South Vietnamese government.

LEHMANN: Into them later on. As I said, as early as latter part of February, the military began to review their role in the plans right on the ground.

With regard to the consulates, yes, the plans were also constantly reviewed. In one case, that of the consulate general in Can Tho, the plan was rather drastically changed.

Q: That's in the south.

LEHMANN: Yes, in the Delta where I had been previous to coming to Saigon as deputy ambassador. As a result of one of the reviews, Terry McNamara, who had replaced me, came up to Saigon at one point in March with a recommendation that in Can Tho in the Delta we switch from an air evacuation plan to a boat evacuation plan from Can Tho down the Bassac River into the South China Sea. After a review by us at the embassy, that change was approved and that is the way it eventually went, as a matter of fact, in April when Can Tho had to be evacuated.

Q: I assume also that at the same time you were in steady consultation with the other major section heads and other players in the embassy that were involved in emergency planning.

LEHMANN: Yes, of course we were. I was constantly talking to them. The situation we faced beginning with the resumption of large-scale North Vietnamese operations had, of course, several components. One of these was evacuation planning for Americans. A related one was evacuation planning for some third country nationals whose potential

evacuation would support. A third element was our role in dealing with the massive refugee situation that was created by the resumption of North Vietnamese military operations.

Basically, I organized the embassy in the following way. I designated the deputy AID director, John Bennett, to be the principal focal point in the embassy for supporting Vietnamese efforts to deal with the refugee situation. I designated George Jacobson, who is well known to Vietnam hands and whose title was special assistant for field operations, to be the principal focal point for supporting evacuation planning by the consulates in our field operations. I designated the defense attach#, General Homer Smith, to begin planning for the control of overall evacuation from Vietnam, to begin planning support operations for an eventual overall evacuation of South Vietnam. That was done by establishing an evacuation control center in the defense attach# compound out atTon Son Nhut. We ostensibly set up that control center initially to support the Vietnamese refugee problem, but we did it with full knowledge and intent that that control center would be immediately convertible into a center for controlling the evacuation of Americans and others from the country as a whole.

Q: Did you find the date?

LEHMANN: Yes. It was on April 1 that we activated the evacuation control center at the defense attach# compound.

Q: As we move through the latter part of March and into April and through April, the North Vietnamese forces are, of course, pursuing the demoralized South Vietnamese as they retreat out of the highlands to the coast—not only eastward but southward. Could you describe the evacuations of the three consulate generals as they began to take place, starting with Da Nang and moving on through Nha Trang, etc. What happened at each and when did it happen? I remember descriptions of great chaos—and also further north

at Hue and Da Nang—and considerable heroism as well on the part of a number of the Americans involved.

LEHMANN: To set the stage, on March 16 the ARVN evacuated Quang Tri in the far north. We had no one in Quang Tri. Immediately after the evacuation of Quang Tri, of course, the situation became critical in Hue, just a little bit to the south. At that time, Theresa Tull was acting principal officer in Da Nang and Al Francis was just about to return to his post. The initial step we took in Hue is that we removed our people overnight only and brought them back into Hue during the daytime. We did that for several days until the situation had clearly reached the point where we could no longer do that if we didn't want to risk them. Therefore, on March 18 I instructed Tull to move the people completely out of Hue and keep them in Da Nang.

Q: Were there many involved in this?

LEHMANN: No. There were not many involved in this. There were only a few Americans and maybe a small number of Vietnamese employees. In that little short interim period, in order to keep up appearance, we would bring them in in the morning, go to their offices, bring them back to Da Nang by helicopter at night—until March 18.

On March 20 the ARVN organized their perimeter defense of Da Nang. The situation in Da Nang was, undoubtedly, the most critical one in this entire story. The ARVN on their part made a strong effort to evacuate the most effective combat units by sea down to the south and the Saigon area so that the units could be employed elsewhere in the war. As usual, the situation was complicated by, of course, the presence of large numbers of families that were simply part of the picture of the Vietnamese military. Then, of course, it was complicated by massive flows of panicky civilian refugees.

So the situation in Da Nang rather quickly got out of hand. The Vietnamese military lost control of the Da Nang airfield which was simply overrun by refugees and by some troops that had left their units. That, of course, eventually complicated our own evacuation

problem. Bear in mind now, overland evacuation to the south was no longer feasible. It either had to be by air or by sea.

I considered in consultation with Francis, with whom I continued to have good communications until the very last moment and with whom I was regularly on the phone during the day and late into the night, the possibility of asking for support from the American military to assist us in evacuation of not only Americans and American employees but others from Da Nang. The specific proposal we had in mind was for the Pacific command to furnish helicopters to be based at Cam Ranh Bay for supplying and to, in effect, assist with a rotary airlift from the Da Nang area. I raised that with the Pacific command and it was turned down. The reason cited why they could not help with the operation was that all their assets were standing by and had to stand by for the evacuation of Phnom Penh—"Operation Eagle Pull" as it was called—and they could not divert it to assist us in our problem in Da Nang. So that was abandoned.

Q: They did not have the resources for both.

LEHMANN: That's correct. They said they could not do both and they could not divert anything from "Eagle Pull" as the Cambodian evacuation was called. So that one fell by the wayside. We had earlier augmented the consulate general in Da Nang with several younger active officers to help Francis and the whole operation to our taking out of Da Nang, of course, the supernumeraries and others who could not be immediately employed in the immediate problem. By the evening of March 26 and early March 27, the situation was pretty well out of hand in Da Nang. The airfield was no longer operational because it was just overrun by mobs. On the evening of Thursday, March 27, I met with the prime minister regarding the situation. He communicated with General Truong in my presence —although it was in Vietnamese and I did not follow it—to explore the possibility of using what remained of functioning military units, primarily ranger battalions, up in Da Nang to reassert control of the airfield so that some sort of airlift out of Vietnam could be continued. It became evident during the night and in the early morning that that could not be done.

My situation was further complicated that, during the night of March 27 to 28, Ambassador Martin returned along with General Wyand. They were supposed to arrive early in the evening of the 27th. Due to technical problems with the aircraft, they didn't arrive until three o'clock in the morning of Friday, March 28. I met them there. I had an early morning conference at four in the morning with Ambassador Martin to brief him on the situation, returned directly from there to the embassy with the situation in Da Nang completely out of hand.

Q: It must have been pretty exhausting as well.

LEHMANN: Yes, somewhat. I was running on adrenalin at that point. Up in Da Nang, meanwhile, while we knew where the few remaining Americans and some more Vietnamese employees were, we had lost track of Francis, the consul general. Sometime during that Friday morning or midday, I found out through Vietnamese channels that Francis, who had gone off to one part of the Da Nang perimeter, was apparently on board a Vietnamese naval ship—a frigate or something of that kind that was also loaded with soldiers and refugees—but no longer in touch with the rest of his people who, at this point, were on a barge in Da Nang harbor. This was the remainder of our staff and Vietnamese.

Q: That includes Terry Tull, I presume.

LEHMANN: No. Terry Tull had gone for some time. The fellow on the barge in charge was Brunson McKinley. Our communicators were able to patch me through to Brunson McKinley on the barge. Now, McKinley didn't know where Francis was and wanted to wait and get hold of Francis to get him back. I, knowing more about Francis' whereabouts, instructed McKinley at that time that, if he had all the rest of the people, to get out of there and leave. That was the end of the evacuation of Da Nang on Friday afternoon, March 28.

Q: What happened to Francis now that he's on this other ship?

LEHMANN: He stayed on that other ship which eventually came down to the south either to Saigon or Vung Tau. The people on the barge also made it out and came down, a few of them with nothing more than the shirts on their backs.

Q: What about Nha Trang which came next? That's where Monty Spear was as consul general.

LEHMANN: Yes. Nha Trang was, of course, the next place to be threatened. It was farther south, just midway down the coast between Quang Tri (and the so called DMZ) and Saigon. Again, in Nha Trang it was question of moving in time but not before time in order not to aggravate the situation and make it even worse. At one point around March 27, the station chief came to me with what he said was very hard intelligence that Nha Trang had, in fact, been surrounded and that we had to move out of there immediately. That was not confirmable by any other information that we had through other channels. So late one evening I had Spear fly down from Nha Trang to discuss the situation with me very quickly. Although the station insisted that its intelligence was correct, I came to the conclusion that it was incorrect. I turned out to be right because a little bit later I had a somewhat red-faced station chief come in to tell me that apparently they had been had on something.

However, within days thereafter the situation had reached the point where Nha Trang had to be evacuated and the evacuation was, in fact, carried out and completed on April 1 both by helicopter lift and some assistance from a Philippine ship offshore that took off some refugees.

Q: You said a helicopter lift. Was the Pacific command involved in this?

LEHMANN: No. All this time the only air assets that we had available and were used were our own Air America, both the small fixed-wing aircraft and the helicopters that we had. There were no U. S. military involved in any of these operations.

Q: How large a group of aircraft did you have?

LEHMANN: I don't remember exactly how many aircraft we had. We had both helicopters, Hueys, and some fixed-wing aircraft, porters—

LEHMANN: We had about 30 aircraft available to us in Air America. Of course, under the arrangement that I described earlier, George Jacobson was the one with overall supervisory responsibility for allocating those aircraft when we needed them to support the evacuation operations as well as other ongoing operations at the time.

Q: Of course, that is two of the consulates. Bien Hoa, which is not very far north of Saigon, would come up next as we see the North Vietnamese forces moving further south and threatening Saigon.

LEHMANN: Bien Hoa evacuation was basically handled through Saigon because Bien Hoa was rather close to Saigon. At some point in the game—it was rather late [and] must have been around April 19,—we had, in effect, closed down the Bien Hoa consulate and moved the people to be evacuated into Saigon and had them evacuated through the Saigon operation which was already in progress at the time.

Q: Who was the consul general there?

LEHMANN: The consul general was Dick Peters and I do not recall exactly when we had Dick actually leave. But, we designated Dick to go to Guam to assist in Guam with the handling of the Vietnamese evacuees, many of whom we were temporarily parking in Guam. We didn't have any authority to move them to the United States.

Q: Then there was Can Tho, of course, in the south and presumably less immediately threatened by the broad offensive but also vulnerable by the general collapse.

LEHMANN: It is important to note here that the ARVN and the Vietnamese governmental structure kept control of the delta right to the end. So the evacuation of Can Tho took place concurrently with the evacuation of the embassy in Saigon. They were given the word early on April 29 when we began execution of option four of Frequent Winds to complete their evacuation. Now, it is true that we had previously thinned out the staff in Can Tho already during the preceding weeks.

Q: And, as I recall from what you had said earlier, that evacuation was carried out by sea.

LEHMANN: The remainder of the evacuation was carried out by sea with the remainder of the staff—Americans and Vietnamese remaining, going down the Bassac River and out into the South China Sea where they were picked up by the Navy.

Q: You mentioned Dick Peters having been sent to Guam to supervise the flow of Vietnamese refugees out of Vietnam already. Could you discuss a bit the degree to which this was taking place, the numbers involved, the pressures involved, and some of the issues that may have come up? Why were they going to Guam? Were they staying there and was there any prospect of their going on?

LEHMANN: We had, of course, various categories of Vietnamese whose evacuation we wanted to support. In some cases we were obligated to support. The principal categories were: our employees; people who had worked closely with us; people who were at very high risk if they were captured by the Vietnamese; and the large numbers of Vietnamese who had established—with the many years of our involvement—some sort of relationship with Americans, either through marriage legalized by civil authority or clergy, or through common law relationships. The Vietnamese extended family system—that sort of thing translates immediately into fathers, mothers, brothers, sisters, and cousins. So there was a massive potential problem here of evacuating Vietnamese.

At the same time, we had a situation where our authority to formally admit people to the United States was extremely limited and subject to the normal kind of consular procedures. We did not receive formal authority to exceed those normal procedures and, in fact, evacuate Vietnamese to the United States under the Attorney General's parole program until April 26, three days before the final evacuation. Yet, we had these other problems on our hands.

On April 17, for example, we already evacuated all Vietnamese employees of the defense-attach# system who were in sensitive jobs and who had to be gotten out. There were other folks in those categories. One of the main problems, of course, was where do you put some of these people that you had no authority for sending to the United States. Guam was, of course, a territory and so Guam was used extensively as a temporary holding area while Washington sorted out some of the legal and political problems that were involved. Shortly after we began really evacuating large numbers of people largely by C-130 aircraft from the military to Guam, it turned out that some of them wanted to come back because they had left their families behind.

Q: I might interject here that I was on a visit to Guam a couple of months after this with a large congressional delegation headed by Congressman Lester Wolf, and we visited the camps there. There were huge numbers. One thing that really struck me was that, in addition to those that were clamoring to go to the United States, there was also a sizable group that was clamoring to return to Vietnam in order to ingratiate themselves with the new authorities. The new Communist authorities were putting up slogans and making all kinds of anti-American statements in order to try to prove that they had credentials to get back and would not be treated harshly when they did return. It was a mess.

LEHMANN: Yes. I can imagine it was. At the time, somewhat earlier when we were still in Saigon and those last remaining ten days or so, the guidance that we gave to our people

in Guam was, “If any Vietnamese wanted to go back, make that a matter of record and back-load them on the empty C-130s that were going back to Vietnam to pick up more.”

Q: Talking particularly about Saigon but also the overall evacuation of Vietnam, I know there were considerable inhibitions in carrying out the evacuation because, in particular, there was the strong possibility that the South Vietnamese might look on this as the desertion of an ally and who knows what their reaction might be. Could you discuss these inhibitions as well as the degree to which they seemed justified in retrospect in the light of experience and the passage of time?

LEHMANN: I think there were basically three factors in considering the final evacuation and the process of getting ready for the final evacuation. The first was that we had to avoid at all costs a repetition on a much larger scale by orders of magnitude of the kind of mob panic that we had in Da Nang under much more serious and much more complicated circumstances which would have been the ones in the Saigon area. We were able to extract all our people out of Da Nang in the end including our Vietnamese employees because it was important that we were able to get them off on the ships, on the barges. We couldn't have done that in Saigon. We couldn't have gotten them on the ships down the Saigon River. In fact, we looked at that option in some detail. Hank Woodrow, an administrative counselor, and I went over that possible option in considerable detail including surveying an area at Newport in Saigon as a possible holding area right next to the port. We dismissed that one as not being practical. We had to avoid a mass panic in the city of Saigon because a mass panic in the city of Saigon would have made shambles out of the whole process and would have made it impossible to do what we finally did when we put into effect option four of Frequent Winds which was the final helicopter airlift out of the city and nearby area.

Secondly and related to the first consideration was the fact that we had some intelligence indicating that there were at least some senior ARVN people who were seriously considering taking action to prevent us from evacuating, thus having us go down with

them. I do have one specifically in mind and I'm not going to mention him because I know where he is.

Q: Is he in this country now?

LEHMANN: He was at one point. He was a senior officer who seriously considered interfering with the American evacuation on the theory that, “If we're going to go down, you are going to go down with us.”

Having this whole American experience in Vietnam end in some sort of a violent conflict between us and the South Vietnamese was, frankly, just too horrible a thing to contemplate. The most serious consideration was the one of things simply getting out of hand in Saigon.

The third consideration was a political one. We did want to keep open, as long as we possible could, the option of retaining some sort of official presence in the area in the event there would be some sort of negotiated settlement involving the North Vietnamese. This was a possibility that would have served the North Vietnamese interests very well had they decided to go through with it because it would have set up tremendous pressures in the United States to make good on what they've always alleged were commitments that Nixon and Kissinger made to them for assistance to Vietnam.

Q: Incidentally, Phil Habib and Bob Miller in that period asked me to write up a feasibility paper. I did that but I didn't think much of it. It was kind of hard. I really didn't know enough about it for one thing. I remember mulling over that a couple of days.

LEHMANN: Well, that's an interesting note, Bob, and to expand a little bit on that—it was not only our own thought that this was an option, we had guidance from the Department to maintain that as an option including the possibility of a very small skeleton staff at the embassy which, had that ever come about, incidentally, would have probably been myself with about three or four other people.

Q: You'd be sticking your neck out, of course.

LEHMANN: That's right. It was just not our own thing. In the press and some political circles, a good deal was made of this particular consideration later on in a very distorted way. We were accused of dragging our feet and having illusions, etc. This is all nonsense. In any event, that thing never, never governed our evacuation operations at all.

Q: We knew in Washington that this was a far out option. We just wanted to be sure we looked at everything.

LEHMANN: It didn't drive our evacuation effort. That proceeded on its own. These were the three main factors that we had to contend with, all of which, of course, drove us to make what planning and preparations we had very quietly, often pretending we were doing something else and not doing what we were really doing. The trouble with this, of course, was that this exposed us to a lot of criticism from the press and some politicians. Oddly enough, usually the politicians were largely at fault, in any event, of getting us to the point at which we were. [Laughter]

Q: Perhaps it would be best now if you told in your own words the phases, more or less, by which people left—a lot of voluntary departures, I suppose, exiting of dependents, phasing down. How practical was that in light of the posturing you needed to convey to the Vietnamese as well as the willingness, I gather, of many Americans, especially unofficial Americans, to leave.

LEHMANN: As I mentioned, on the first of April we activated the evacuation control center at the defense attach# compound, ostensibly at the time to monitor the refugee flow situation. But, it was in full recognition and with the intention of getting this facility ready to control the evacuation of Americans and Vietnamese in the end. We began to draw down people in the first two weeks of April by encouraging contractors to depart by sending out a number of dependents, family members, and some nonessential personal under various

pretexts of one sort or another. In fact, we began in a sense ordering the evacuation on about April 3 or 4. One of the things that was done—it was not the only one—was that we had the so called orphan lift beginning at that time. We designated large numbers of especially women and others—not only women but other nonessential personnel—as escorts for the orphans, far in excess of what was really needed but that was just a subterfuge to get them out. Of course, one of the great tragedies of that particular situation was that one of the very first flights crashed on April 4, 1975, with substantial casualties of both the orphans and the so called escorts. It was a very sad thing and one of the saddest moments of my life.

With regard to official American personnel, I had already requested earlier in March two things from the Department. One was not to have any additional family members come into the country of people being transferred into the country. You must remember that we had an American staff country-wide of all U. S. agencies of about 2,000 people. That was granted, incidentally. That was approved and there was no trouble on that one. But, the other authority asked for was authority for us in Saigon to determine who should go out immediately without further reference to Washington. I never got that. That apparently doesn't fit the bureaucratic system, but it was the kind of leeway that we needed. In Washington they kept insisting they had to approve each thing which was a nuisance to put it mildly.

However, to get back to the main point. We used the subterfuges such as I've mentioned. We tried to encourage people to leave and reduce the number of Americans in the country. On April 15 our evacuee holding facility at the defense attach# compound went operational. As I mentioned earlier, on April 17 a number of sensitive local employees —most of those with intelligence agencies and related operations including the defense attach#—were evacuated. On April 21 we began around-the-clock C-141 and C-130 flights in and out of Tan Son Nhut going mostly to the Philippines and to some other destinations.

Between April 4 and April 27 about 27,000 people were actually moved out of Vietnam. Most of these were moved by military MAC flights to either Guam or the Philippines.

Q: These were mostly Vietnamese.

LEHMANN: These were a mixture of Americans and Vietnamese and this is an important point. One of the greatest difficulties that we had was the considerable reluctance of many Americans to leave, especially American contractor personnel. There were a lot of military retirees who had settled down with Vietnamese “families” over the years. All of these people were extremely reluctant to leave without their families. Now, in many cases these family relationships were not legally blessed. They were simply common law relationships but still very strong. But, there was no legal authority under which we could evacuate or take these people into the United States. Moreover, the family relationships were extended ones because they not only involved the common law wife and the common law children but also the mother, the father, the brothers, the sisters, and often cousins. Nobody wanted to leave without the other. Yet, we had no way by which we had any authority to bring these people into the United States and, of course, none to bring them into the Philippines who happened to have an independent government. This was the kind of problem that we were faced with. When we're talking about an average family here, we're probably talking of a family of at least a dozen and sometimes more.

That was only part of the problem. The additional problem was that, while we wanted to send Americans out, Americans kept coming in and there was no way to stop them. Americans kept coming in including, incidentally, some official Americans and some Foreign Service officers. They kept coming in and looking for their friends and acquaintances or their relations. In many of these cases they had North Vietnamese wives and now they were coming in because they wanted to do something to get their wives' parents, brothers, sisters, etc., out under some sort of expedited procedures. So we were having a situation where we were keeping track of the number of Americans in country and we were moving out Americans, but the total number at any given day wouldn't really go

down because others would come in. This was a situation which is probably of somewhat unparalleled difficulty. At least, I don't know the precedent for it.

Q: There's probably no country where we've been so closely involved over such a long period of time where the numbers of Americans were so great. Therefore, the number of involvements were so great. You didn't have this in the Iranian evacuation, for example. They were limited. This is a kind of unique experience. In fact, you didn't have this in Cambodia. It is totally different.

LEHMANN: That's right. The Cambodian evacuation, I think, consisted of less than 400 people.

Q: Yes. You knew it was a much cleaner kind of thing.

LEHMANN: Yes. Possibly.

Q: Incidentally, what was happening with various third country nationals? There must have been a lot of South Koreans, Japanese, British, French, etc. Were they making arrangements for themselves or were they asking us for help, and to what degree could we help them?

LEHMANN: Most of them were making arrangements for themselves. However, they were in very close touch with us daily during those last weeks and last month and a half. I had either DCMs or charg#s or ambassadors contact me wanting to know what our view was and getting our appraisal so that they could decide what they would do. The British moved out on their own at the time. So did the Australians as well as the Israelis, the Belgians, the Dutch representatives and the Germans. They moved out on their own.

There were a few left that we took out with us on the last day including the Italian ambassador, a very fine fellow. We were good friends. We brought him out along with some U. N. people and a couple of other third nationals. Just who they were escapes me.

The Japanese made a decision to remain although they cut their staff down very much. They remained which turned out to be rather helpful. The Chinese—that's the Taiwan Chinese—left on their own. The Koreans left, and it was a problem because there were a number of South Koreans that were left in the country on April 29. We evacuated some of them. Unfortunately, a number of Koreans were in that very last batch of evacuees along with some Vietnamese that we had in the embassy compound when it was shut down and they remained behind. That is always something that made me feel very badly, but we were simply told that we had no more and that was it. Eventually, that problem was solved with the help of the Japanese who had remained. The French also remained.

There was one amusing incident with regard to third country nationals, incidentally. I believe it was in the early afternoon of April 29 when we were already in the process of executing the final evacuation. I had a call from the Polish ICCS representative in Saigon who was very concerned about his situation and asked if we might do something to help him. I was sorely tempted at the time—like an attractive auction—but there was real difficulty which was due to the fact that he was located some distance away from Tan Son Nhut and the embassy. At that particular time the situation in the city was beginning to get chaotic. I would have had to tell General Smith to dispatch some sort of detail, including some Marines and some transportation, to go and pick him up. That was too much of a risk under the existing situation. So I told him there was nothing I could do for him. He'd just have to stay where he was and await the arrival of the North Vietnamese.

Q: Before the final evacuation on April 29 and 30, were there any significant problems between the mission in Saigon and Washington or other agencies in Washington and the field?

LEHMANN: There were a number of problems that arose. Some were of lesser significance than others. One of the early problems that arose was when, on March 25, I requested authority from Washington to move dependents to safe havens in Manila, Bangkok, and other places on our own authority as I saw fit in Saigon. Well, that was

never granted. The Department insisted on bureaucratic review back in Washington. That kind of thing is not suitable to this sort of situation. However, we managed to live with it.

I suppose a more serious problem arose during the latter part of April because of tremendous pressures, political pressures in Washington for us to speed things up and to do things which we on the ground knew would have catastrophic results if we did so. Obviously, the Department and the rest of the Executive Branch was under considerable pressure from politicians up on the hill and others. We felt that pressure, but we just simply had to resist it. But, that was a rather serious problem.

A third problem, of course, was one I mentioned earlier regarding the evacuation of Vietnamese. We did not receive authority to move any Vietnamese under extraordinary procedures to the United States until April 25 or 26. Up until that time we were theoretically constrained to those who were eligible for visas which, of course, was wives and children of American citizens and that was all.

Another category of problems arose on a couple of occasions when there was a need for urgent action—really urgent action. The main problem that arose in that connection was when sometime in early or mid April—and I cannot remember when—the FAA regional office in Honolulu, without a word to anybody, suddenly declared Tan Son Nhut airport no longer safe for American commercial aircraft. This came just at a time when I was still heavily engaged in trying to hold Pan Am's feet to the fire to keep flying. It was also quite unjustified because, when that was done, the situation in the general area of the airfield had not changed from what it had been for a couple of year before that. Apparently, the FAA decision was based on some questionable intelligence assessment which they received from PACAF, Pacific U. S. Air Force Command, in Honolulu. This was just the kind of thing, the moment it became public, that would set off a panic. If I had called the State Department, a committee would have met the next morning and started discussing this. So I just simply bypassed it. I called the NSC staff in the White House directly and

demanded the recision within hours, and I got it. There were a couple of instances of that kind.

In connection with other agencies, I mentioned that Pan Am, fairly early in the game, wanted to discontinue their operations and Hank Woodrow and I had to put a good deal of pressure on the airline to have them continue. I admit they had a real problem because they would be way overbooked on their daily flights out of Saigon. Then, when flight time came, there would be a lot of empty spaces because there were simply no shuttles, or people were booking seats on the airplane that didn't have the exit documentation. Nevertheless, it was important to keep them flying.

I had a similar problem with Flying Tigers whom we also had to pressure to keep flying. They did not respond and stopped when they decided they had to.

One last problem, not a significant one, that arose was with the Seventh Day Adventist Hospital. That hospital provided basically medical support for the whole American community. I was told at some point—I think it was again around mid April—that they wanted to pull out. So I along with Woodrow and Dustin who was our medical officer went out to see the Seventh Day Adventists and persuaded them to remain. That was very important to us because there was in the background, of course, always the possibility of casualties and that was our medical support. But, that problem was resolved satisfactorily.

Q: They stayed right up to the end?

LEHMANN: They remained very close to the end, and even on the last day they were still functional, although largely with a small Vietnamese skeleton staff.

Q: This was obviously a time of considerable distress on the staff. How did the staff perform as a whole? Were there any particular problems that arose?

LEHMANN: Let me say first of all that the overall performance of the staff was great. It was just terrific. Everybody worked hard, long hours under great personal stress and did a great job. We tried to recognize that in an awards program that, in fact, was not completed until early 1976. I think we generally managed to do so. One omission about that program that bothers me to this day is that after I, acting as chairman of an awards board here in Washington—I came back from Frankfurt for that purpose with several others—had completed the program, I gave to Director General Carol Laise a well-considered, small list of senior staff officers who had not been included in the program. They had, along with me, constituted the board. I pointed out in that note that I gave her that any omissions on that list were quite deliberate but that I thought the performance of these other officers—I had them by name across the mission, not just State—ought to be recognized. That was never done. I was told later on that someone else took it up with the director general and was told that considering awards for those senior staff officers would raise the questions of the ambassador, the DCM, and that those were political issues. So that never took place.

As regards to the staff performance as a whole, whenever you have a tremendously large number of Americans on the staff as we had in Vietnam under conditions like that you are bound to have an occasional problem. We did have to rather promptly relieve one fairly senior military officer and had him depart because he jumped the gun and disobeyed instructions. We had problems with two or three other people throughout this very large staff. That's very minor, really—one or two who simply couldn't take it and had to be ordered out.

We had one problem with one member of the senior staff who had been a disruptive influence in the mission for some time before that. I will not go much farther than that. In retrospect, we should have sent the gentleman on back to the United States some months before that since he was the subject of complaints to me of virtually every other member of the senior staff at various points. But, we did not do that. That, I think, is a lesson for the

future. If anybody is ever in a situation of that kind, he should identify personnel problems of that nature early in the stage and, no matter how tough it is, take action.

Q: Were these substantive points of difference or were they related to rough personal relationships to people?

LEHMANN: They were partly substantive in nature and they were in large measure related to ways of operating and running the mission.

Q: Before we continue with discussing the evacuation, it might be useful to record just what happened to President Thieu. When did he resign? What was our role? What did we do?

LEHMANN: After some exchanges of communications between ourselves and Washington, Ambassador Martin went to see Thieu on April 20. The details of that conversation are recorded in the traffic and I don't know to what extent that traffic has been released or not. However, in general I can say that what he told Thieu was that the decision as to what to do was, of course, entirely up to him. But, if he should decide to resign, we would assist him and get him, his family, and a small number of his close assistants into a safe haven. Thieu resigned on April 22, two days later announcing that resignation in a very bitter speech. I do not blame him for being bitter, incidentally. He had a right to be. He resigned that day. Two days later on April 24 we had arranged for a special U. S. aircraft at the airport to take him and his family and a few assistants to Taipei.

Q: We discussed the situation regarding the evacuation of people—American, Vietnamese, and third country nationals. What was done with regard to sensitive materials —classified records, etc.? I understand there also was a problem regarding the nuclear research reactor at Da Lat.

LEHMANN: We began packing and sending out embassy files and records at the beginning of April or maybe it was even early March. This was the kind of thing

that we could do quietly. Nobody would see that. Things could be packed up in the communications room and shipped out.

Q: They were going all the way back to the United States?

LEHMANN: They were going all the way back to the United States. We also, for example, had the bubble that had to be gotten out. That's a rather large and unwieldy thing and, of course, that was a visible act. Most people really don't know when they see big pieces of plastic lying around in the courtyard, so that was sent out. Whatever documents that were not sent out at the time or taken out by us individually along in our briefcases towards the end were destroyed, including some during the night of April 29 to April 30. In any event, everything was either sent out or destroyed. Nothing fell into anybody's hands. This was not a Tehran situation. [Laughter] I get rather upset every once in a while when I still read stories about the situation in Tehran having the greatest intelligence loss since the evacuation of the embassy in Saigon. We didn't lose anything.

Q: Was there anything lost in the consulate generals?

LEHMANN: No. Also the same applies to the consulate generals. The consulates had either sent back or, in their cases, mostly destroyed all their files and records. That's true for all four of them.

Q: And then Da Lat?

LEHMANN: There was a research reactor in Da Lat, so called Triga reactor that had been part of the USAID program many years before. After Tet 1968, there was some nervousness in certain circles in Washington about fuel elements of that reactor. I recall distinctly then when I was director of the office of atomic energy as well as others in the State Department being approached by the Atomic Energy Commission to get those fuel elements out of at the time. Ambassador Bunker quite correctly just ignored that

nonsense. In any event, we did want to get the fuel out in April of 1975. Again, it was one of those things where we wanted to act in time but not before time.

For about a week before we finally decided—and I did—to move those fuel elements, there were a couple of special C-130 aircraft standing by at Clarke Field in the Philippines with technicians and the equipment necessary to pull the fuel elements out of that small reactor. I finally permitted them to come in and go ahead with that. I believe it must have been around mid April. Then we did preserve the proper forms in all of this as much as I asked the Vietnamese government to give me a formal letter requesting that we remove the fuel elements, and they did so. It was a slightly hectic operation. The NVA was beginning to approach the area. This was in the highlands, of course. It took all night, but it was done and properly done.

Q: We are now coming down to the final period before the evacuation and, particularly, to that last weekend. This is the period of Friday, April 25, to Monday, April 28. How did the situation evolve during those days, and what were you doing?

LEHMANN: First of all, let's keep in mind that at this point we had been operating around the clock C-141 and C-130 flights from the airport since Monday, April 2l. In the middle of that week and the latter part of that week a kind of a lull set in on the battlefield. There wasn't much by way of North Vietnamese offensive action.

Q: They were close to Saigon.

LEHMANN: But, they were beginning to approach Saigon. It was shortly after that a rather tough battle at Xuan Loc where the ARVN had really distinguished themselves and fought very well, indeed. At that time there was, of course, some speculation as to the reason for that lull. There are two possibilities. One was that it reflected a political decision in Hanoi to have the whole business end in some form as an ostensible government of national

reconciliation which they always said they had wanted. This would have been, of course, a complete farce—

Q: With the idea of negotiating with people who were neutral or had that reputation.

LEHMANN: With the idea of negotiating with Minh who had replaced Thieu. He was, therefore, from their standpoint the ideal candidate with whom to negotiate this charade or farce.

The other possibility, of course, was that, having conducted extensive offensive operations, they simply had a logistical problem and needed to regroup and reorganize. There is still a third possibility that it was a combination of both of those things. In any event, the first option I mentioned, if it was ever considered, was dismissed. In retrospect it is probably evident that the lull was due to a need to regroup, reorganize and look after their logistics.

Q: If they had had some resistance from the ARVN elements that had fought a bit more than people thought, perhaps.

LEHMANN: Yes. That certainly is so. However, none of this affected our evacuation operations which, as I said, continued. On Thursday I decided that the time had come for us to evacuate the last of the wives which were simply the wives of a senior officers including my own, Hank Woodrow's wife, Nancy Bennett, the wife of the political counselor, and one other lady and two children which we still had. They were the children of the divorced consular officer, Peter Orr, whom we had to retain because we needed him in our operation. I also had Mrs. Martin on that list but her name was deleted by the ambassador. In order to do this we had the Army send in a U-21 from Thailand because we didn't want to have the departure of the senior wives noted out where most of the evacuation was taking place. We also needed to maintain the fiction that they were simply going to Bangkok for an extended weekend. That was done on Friday, April 25.

The lull, as I mentioned, did continue through Sunday, April 27. Beginning on Monday morning, April 28, it became quite clear early on that the North Vietnamese were actively resuming their offensive operations. At about six o'clock in the late afternoon on Monday, April 28, a number of A-37 aircraft, obviously manned either by North Vietnamese or defecting South Vietnamese pilots, attacked the flight lines at the Tan Son Nhut airport.

At the time that occurred, I had just gone out of my office and gone out into the second courtyard of the embassy in the area where the swimming pool and the snack bar was located. I had gone there to straighten out the problem that was reported to me about having buses with evacuees leave from there to go to the airport. This was an area where we were assembling evacuees to bus them to the airport. I was told there was a problem of a delay and I had gone out to look after that just at the time that that air strike in Tan Son Nhut took place. Now, there have been some rather lurid accounts of that particular event. When the strike took place, it precipitated a certain amount of quite unnecessary rushing around and a bit of upset. I might note parenthetically here that, being a veteran of the Italian campaign of World War II including the Casino Line, the Anzio Beachhead and quite a few other events, I can differentiate between the difference of unfriendly high explosives coming down in your immediate vicinity in which case you would have a very strong, direct personal interest, and something that is happening a mile or two away. In that case you can afford to take a detached professional interest in what is going on. This strike out at Tan Son Nhut, lurid descriptions in some books to the contrary, was in the latter category. It was quite a distance away. There was no immediate danger to the embassy or anybody in the embassy. This did not prevent our very solicitous, protective Marines from immediately surrounding the minister with weapons drawn in order to protect him. This was very touching but it was somewhat overdone.

Q: This brings us to a side question of what was the system on assembly areas and movement to the Tan San Nhut airport for final evacuation? Obviously, you've indicated

that the chancery itself was an assembly area and that buses were picking up people there. Were there other assembly areas and what was the plan of movement?

LEHMANN: On April 15, sometime earlier, we had activated an evacuee holding facility out at the DAO compound. The system was that anybody being evacuated by fixed-wing aircraft—which, as I mentioned, were operating around the clock beginning April 21—would come out there or be bussed out there either from the embassy itself or from some other designated locations in town, notably staff housing areas.

Q: That system was still continuing at this late date?

LEHMANN: That was continuing at that late date until the air strike on the flight line at Tan Son Nhut on Monday evening. The attack on the flight line in which at least one C-130 was destroyed in effect ended the fixed-wing airlift.

Q: This was about what time?

LEHMANN: The air strike took place at six o'clock in the evening. After we had rather quickly assessed the situation and in the course of the next hour, a decision was made that it would be too risky to continue fixed-wing operations out of Tan Son Nhut because of the danger that we might lose an aircraft full of people.

Q: Were people then brought back into the housing areas that were already out there assembling?

LEHMANN: The people that were out at the DAO compound remained there. The people that were in the embassy at the time remained there for the time being. After we had made the decision to discontinue fixed-wing operations, the rest of the evening was taken up with reviewing the final plans for the increasing likelihood but not yet a decision that we would have to go to a helicopter evacuation—which is technically known as option four of Frequent Winds"—the following day.

That went on throughout the early evening. Shortly after midnight—the night from Monday to Tuesday morning—the ambassador decided that he and I should return to our residences and try to get some rest in view of the likelihood that a lot of major and crucial decisions had to be made the next day. I got back to my house between one o'clock and two o'clock in the morning. I tried to get some sleep.

Q: As you know, I'm involved in going to embassies on crisis management exercises. One of the things that I've stressed is—and this comes up in the exercises—the extreme importance of fatigue in desperate situations or critical situations and the need for people to consciously put aside time to recharge their batteries no matter how the man is. This if reflected in the last point that you were making about the ambassador's decision that you and he needed to get some sleep and for some of the others, too. I know earlier, too, at one point you mentioned having been awake for some huge number of hours. It must be all through this that there must have been the question of physical exhaustion confronting quite a number of people but particularly the senior staff that were so heavily engaged in the operation. Do you have any comments on what was done?

LEHMANN: I quite agree. That's important for all concerned to get some sort of rest. Otherwise, they become useless. With regard to most of the staff, we had earlier worked out a shift system. Because we had designated certain elements of the mission to worry about various categories of potential evacuees—the defense attach# to worry about the Vietnamese military, the political section to worry about politicians, and other people to worry about relatives of Americans, etc. These things had gone on a shift basis somewhat earlier so that nobody would work more than about twelve hours or so. That was the attempt that was made.

For the absolute senior staff, it was on a more irregular basis. You got what rest whenever you could.

Q: This was an attempt to get it.

LEHMANN: Yes.

Q: There was a good deal written at various times about the large banyan tree that was located in the embassy courtyard and which became a symbol of what was to be done. There had been a number of rather lurid press accounts, for example, on the refusal of Ambassador Martin to agree to the removal of that large tree. It indicated to some that the embassy was out of touch with the realities of the situation, that the refusal to take down the tree meant that they did not understand the evacuation might have to occur and, obviously, the tree would have to come down if the helicopters were to come in. The situation would be amenable to evacuation. What was the real story?

LEHMANN: The helicopter evacuation plan called for some of the helicopters to land on the roof helipad and others—notably the rather heavy CA-53s that the roof pad could not support—land in the courtyard of the embassy where this famous, beautiful banyan tree was located. It always was obvious that, when push came to shove, the tree would have to come down. One of the problems here, however, was that the tree was not only large but it was also very visible from the street. The streets were getting increasingly crowded as panic was beginning to slowly develop in the city of Saigon. The removal of the tree would be a visible act that would undoubtedly spread like wild fire throughout the city.

As I was returning from the outer courtyard and surrounded by my solicitous Marines to go back to my office to assess the situation and try to find out just what had happened out at Tan Son Nhut, I was passing the tree. As I was passing the tree, one of our Seabees was vigorously but somewhat ineffectually chopping away at the tree with an axe in what was quite clearly a self-initiated attempt to clear the area for use as a helicopter landing zone. As I entered the embassy chancery building, I billed the security officer to promptly have the Seabee cease and desist from the rather ineffectual and somewhat premature efforts, to bring in some power tools such as chain saws, etc., have them ready, but not to take any action regarding the tree until instructed and until the time was right. I then forgot

about the tree and turned on to other things that we discussed in response to an earlier question.

As a matter of fact, I'm not sure that Graham Martin ever knew anything about the tree. [Laughter]

Q: You've had your sleep now and are fairly rested. We're brought up now to the early morning hours of Tuesday, April 29. What took place then? When and how were the crucial decisions made?

LEHMANN: I didn't really get any sleep. I got to bed between one and two and dozed off for a while. At about 4:15 A. M. I was roused from my dozing by a series of explosions out in the direction of the Tan Son Nhut airfield and the defense attach# compound. About ten minutes later at about 4:30 A. M. the phone rang and the report—I don't recall now whether it was directly from the defense attach# or from an officer at the embassy chancery—was that there had been a rocket attack on the DAO compound and that two of the embassy Marine security guards out there had been killed.

That, of course, ended the rest period. I got up, showered, went down, and Mr. Tui, my major domo and butler, gave me some breakfast. I packed some extra underwear, an extra pair of socks and a couple of little things in my briefcase. I had a last conversation with my butler who had previously told me that he did not want to leave and wanted to remain. He was an elderly man. I made some final arrangements with him to get some money to him in addition to money he had already been given—that's dollars, not piasters. That money, incidentally, was delivered later by Brunson McKinley and Bob Martin to him. After having a little breakfast, I went back to the chancery. Ambassador Martin arrived from his residence just a little bit later on. We jointly began to review the situation, getting reports from General Smith out at Tan Son Nhut as to the details of the rocket attack which intermittently continued throughout the area.

Q: Did they seem to be targeting the American compound there or was this a general attack on the airport?

LEHMANN: Other facilities were also being spotted, but it was the first time at a little after four that morning that an attack appeared to be targeted specifically on an American installation. The cause of the death of the two Marines was a direct hit on the sandbag emplacement in which they were. It was just one of those things.

Ambassador Martin decided to go out to Tan Son Nhut and review the situation out there personally with General Smith. While out there, he had a telephone conversation with General Scowcroft back here in Washington which, however, did not result as yet in a definite conclusion on whether or not we would continue fixed-wing airlift rather than go to option four of the evacuation plan.

Q: He was with the NSC?

LEHMANN: Yes. Brent Scowcroft. Ambassador Martin then returned to the embassy. Meanwhile, it became very clear that damage to runways at the airfield and other things made it quite impossible to continue a fixed-wing airlift. Ambassador Martin then got on the telephone again, this time from the chancery, with General Scowcroft. A decision to go to option four of Frequent Winds, the helicopter airlift was made between 10:30 and 10:40 on Tuesday morning.

The initial moves by helicopter directly out to the fleet were by Air America helicopter. We were using Air America, our own helicopters, first in the morning to move people from the assembly areas either to the embassy or to the DAO holding facilities out at the airfield. Later on, we initially were using the Air America helicopters to move evacuees directly out to the fleet. The plan called for the Marine ground security force to arrive at the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut—which had priority on the evacuation under our plan—one hour after the option four execute order was given. To illustrate that plans would go wrong,

the ground security force arrived three hours later and not one hour later. Of course, the first helicopter evacuees, using fleet and Marine Corps helicopters, were those same choppers that brought in the security force and then would lift evacuees back out.

Q: This was sometime in the afternoon.

LEHMANN: This was between one and two in the afternoon. That delay cost us something at the end of the whole operation. I found out much later that the reason for that delay was that there had to be some cross-loading out at the fleet to marry the Marines that were supposed to come in to secure both the DAO compound and the embassy compound and were not the same ships as the helicopters were. They had to move people around.

By early or mid-afternoon, the embassy was surrounded by masses of people—mobs. The security situation became increasingly risky. It was only with some difficulty that we managed to get into the compound. Some people for whose evacuation we had really special responsibilities—for example, Trang Kon Gu, the leader of the Vietnamese Labor Federation, and his people; Mu Vien, the minister of the interior; Tran Van Lam, the former foreign minister who had signed the Paris agreement. Nonetheless, all this was accomplished, but the security situation was really getting touchy. I, therefore, telephoned the General who was out at the DAO compound and told him that we urgently needed about a platoon of additional Marines in addition to our embassy guards in the compound in order to maintain the security. These arrived about an hour later. The famous tree, incidentally, had been removed and gotten out of the way well ahead of time.

I was not in Ambassador Martin's office when he had the conversation with Washington which resulted in the decision to execute the helicopter lift, but several of the other senior staff people were. I was busy in my own office doing various other things on the telephone. After the decision was made, Hank Woodrow walked over into my office, told me the decision was made, and I went back to see Graham Martin to have it confirmed to me directly. I then walked out and told the security officer now to chop down that tree. The tree

was chopped down long before anybody was ready to arrive by helicopter in the embassy courtyard. Timing was, indeed, quite adequate.

Q: Incidentally, now that we're at the point where the mobs are outside and the additional Marines are being brought or had just been brought in from Tan Son Nhut, what was the situation in regard to the dispositions of the American community? Were they all in the embassy compound? Were some in the compound, some at Tan Son Nhut, and some in the housing compounds, or what?

LEHMANN: By the time we're talking about, all Americans still in the area were either at the DAO compound or in the embassy compound. A little bit earlier some of the last ones, including some journalists, had arrived at the compound and gotten through into the compound only with some difficulty to get through the crowds. I should be quite accurate here. All those who wanted to leave—there was one fellow, a contractor who turned out later on to somehow not get the word. It was his own fault. He was left behind. Then, of course, there were a couple of journalists who stayed on deliberately.

Q: By this time now we are getting the helicopter airlift going. As I understand it, the people were being removed by helicopter to two locations, both at Tan Son Nhut and from the embassy compound. Presumably, in the latter, since the banyan tree was cut down, you would have the larger helicopters landing in the courtyard and the smaller types landing on the embassy roof. Is that correct?

LEHMANN: The priority was evacuation from the DAO compound at Tan Son Nhut. So most of the initial lift by helicopter went out of the DAO compound. That operation was completed by 2000, 8:00 in the evening on Tuesday. On its completion, General Smith and the few remaining DAO staff left a few minutes after eight that evening. That ended that phase of the operation.

Up until that time, we had relatively little lift out of the embassy compound. It is correct, of course, that that lift—which was really only beginning in the mid-afternoon out of the

embassy compound—did involve the lighter helicopters, the CH-46s—from the roof. The heavy ones, the CH-53s, were from the courtyard where the famous banyan tree had previously been. We were putting as many as 70 people into a CH-53 which was overloading it somewhat. Since many of them were Vietnamese, they were rather small—

Q: Given the fact that you had these crowds—mobs, even—outside the embassy gates and a great deal of pandemonium and confusion going on, was there any effort by the mobs or people in them to interfere with the landing of the CH-53 aircraft into the compound?

LEHMANN: Not in any significant way. All these poor people were desperately trying to do was to try to get into the compound with the hope that somehow they might be taken out. There was an occasional shot fired from outside the compound, but we could not really determine whether that was directed at an incoming helicopter or not. In any event, it did not in any way interfere with the operation. At this point, we did have enough Marines to secure both the inner and the outer embassy compound, although occasionally someone might have slipped in who shouldn't have. It did not affect anything.

In the course of the evening—and I can't remember exactly when it was, but I suspect it was around 8:30 or 9:00 in the evening—the military suggested that we suspend further helicopter operations for the time being and resume them at first light the next morning. The ambassador and I vetoed that very promptly and insisted that we would have to continue the operation throughout the night. That insistence was based on both what the intelligence were still able to gather about the North Vietnamese—and there were some that were still available to us—and on a judgement that the situation around the embassy, even with the larger Marine detachment was becoming increasingly untenable.

At that point we may have had somewhere between 1,000 and 1,500 people in the compound, both American and Vietnamese with a heavy preponderance of Vietnamese. During the night, therefore, the lift continued although at times there would be long

intervals which, in our view, were excessively long intervals between arriving helicopters from the fleet. I understand, and I think we understood then, that there were deep problems of refueling, fatigue of the crews, etc. But it was clear that the operation definitely had to continue and could not be stopped and resumed the next morning.

Q: Were you able to set up lights so they could see their way in?

LEHMANN: There was no problem about that. They could see their way in. The situation in the courtyard was dealt with by having embassy cars parked around the perimeter of the courtyard with the headlights on. That illuminated the courtyard situation which was a tricky thing for the pilots. It was very tricky because of walls and antennas and other mass nearby that they had to get over before they could clear the courtyard with their heavy loads.

One of the things that became a matter of some concern is that sometime during the time around midnight or a little bit later it began to rain just very lightly. Remember, we were now in April and now at the beginning of the monsoon. It began to rain very lightly, and the mere fact of water on the hulls of the helicopters added to their weight. So we had one very critical moment where a pilot with a load full of people tried to lift out of the courtyard and could not get enough altitude. He had to put back down and they had to unload some people off before he could get out.

Q: They probably didn't want to get off.

LEHMANN: No. They did not want to get off. So that was a moment of great concern because, if we had an accident in the courtyard with a broken helicopter, that would have finished the lift out of the courtyard and we would have had to rely entirely on the smaller choppers coming in on the roof.

Q: How many could they take out? Was there quite a difference?

LEHMANN: There was quite a difference. As I said, we could put as many as 70 people in the CH-53s, and I think the maximum number of CH-46s might have been about 40.

Q: That was about a two-to-one difference.

LEHMANN: Close to two-to-one difference. At the same time, we were also destroying a few last documents by burning up on the rooftop.

Q: We continue on with this process. I guess the only thing to ask before we get into the final last withdrawal is were you getting any panic among the Vietnamese and also the Americans—all the people that were still waiting their turn to leave as time went on? Were there priorities among them? Were they waiting orderly, particularly since I know that some people were left behind at the end? In other words, was this anticipated by some of them?

LEHMANN: No. There was no panic among any of the people. We had people waiting in the courtyard. We had people waiting in the stairwell of the chancery building to go up to the rooftop, but there was no panic. At one point, when we had reduced the number still waiting to a more manageable proportion, we abandoned the outer embassy courtyard—the area where the swimming pool, the snack bar and the administrative section was—and removed everybody into the inner courtyard which gave us also a smaller perimeter to protect against the crowd outside.

As to priorities, well, you know, your priorities as far as we were concerned—the first obligations, of course, to Americans. Certainly, the second was to any high-risk Vietnamese, to our employees. But, we did not have a priority question as such arise. The small group that in the end was left behind that I mentioned earlier, largely due to the fact that the entire lift operation began about two to three hours later than it should have, was a mix of Vietnamese and Koreans.

Q: Let's get down to the final hours and deep into the night. I guess the final pull-out you mentioned was about six o'clock in the morning. I recall that Ambassador Graham Martin

went out before you, apparently because of a direct order from the President to do so. Can you get into the last few loads, you might say?

LEHMANN: At about four o'clock in the morning, the ambassador and I went to the remaining communications set-up, the last one. We sent our final message. The date-time group of that message was 291215 Zulu which, of course, is Greenwich time. The message said, “Plan to close mission about 0430, 30 April local time. This is the last message from Embassy Saigon.”

After that message was sent, the communicator disabled the communications set-up. He did whatever he had to do to protect the remaining equipment. He got in line to leave. We were not, however, out of communications because we still had a link all the way back to Washington through the MACPAC radio of a Marine with the Marine security force and the major commanding that force. After we sent the message, there was really nothing much else for us to do. We waited while the operation was continuing to try to get as many people out of the courtyard as possible.

At some time a little later—it might have been around 4:30—a very peremptory message did come through direct from the White House where they were monitoring the situation directing the ambassador and the remaining staff to leave by the next helicopter. We considered that for a while and let the operation continue still for a while longer. Finally, after some consultation between myself and the Marine major, decided that the time had come for the ambassador and the rest of us to leave. Initially, through an error we all went downstairs rather than upstairs because the thought was we were going to leave on one of the bigger helicopters. But, that was not to be. The ambassador and remaining staff trooped on up to the rooftop where one CH-46 was just landing and another one was hovering not far away. As the CH-46 landed, Ambassador Martin along with George Jacobson, Tom Holgar, and a few others started walking towards the helicopter. Some of the rest of us began to follow, but that crew chief knew when he had his man. What his

orders were, as soon as he got the ambassador on board, all the people who have to be right along next to him. He waved the rest of us back and the helicopter took off.

Q: Not full, I gather.

LEHMANN: Not entirely full. It had some other people on it. It had some remaining mission warden guards on it who helped the control of all of this and a few other people, but it was not entirely full. Shortly thereafter, the next CH-46 put down on the rooftop, and the rest of us—which included Hank Woodrow, Joe Bennett, Brunson McKinley, Jim Devine, an officer named Jay Blowers, and the last mission warden guards boarded that helicopter which became really very jammed and crowded. We stayed up on the rooftop for about twenty to twenty-five minutes because the Marine major, who was doing a very competent job of running things out in the courtyard, was using the helicopter's radio to firm up his final plans for extracting the Marine detachment which was the final step, of course. So we sat there for about twenty minutes while he was working that out over the radio. We lifted off according to my records at 5:20 in the morning.

Q: You don't know the Marine officer's name by any chance, do you?

LEHMANN: Sorry. I should, but I don't.

Q: How long did it take to get out to the fleet and what happened when you arrived?

LEHMANN: It took about a half an hour or a little bit more—maybe about 45 minutes. As we were leaving the Saigon area, I could look out the helicopter and I could see the approaching North Vietnamese columns with their headlights out and beginning to enter the outskirts of the city. Our exit was covered by armed aircraft from the fleet. That had been the case throughout this whole thing.

Q: But, there was no interference from the North Vietnamese?

LEHMANN: There was no interference. There was no attempt to interfere. I think that was probably intentional. It took about 45 minutes to get out to the fleet. Our helicopter landed on the Denver, which was an LPD, a landing platform dock. It had Marines on it and assault boats and helicopters. The ambassador and those with him, meanwhile, had gone out to the Blueridge, so we were separated at this point. Arriving at the Denver, the first thing that the Navy made sure of was that nobody had any weapons on them. I was deprived of one little mace thing that I had with me. I think Woodrow was deprived of a revolver he had which I'm not sure he ever recovered. Except for that, they were very solicitous and gave us a lot of food to eat. They gave us an initially rather crowded place to sleep, but that was sorted out later on.

Q: You stayed on the ship until it got to the Philippines?

LEHMANN: The fleet stayed out. After the evacuation was completed—the Marines, incidentally, were extracted from the compound by about seven o'clock in the morning or a little bit before, perhaps, moving up through the building gradually and abandoning the courtyard which was immediately taken over by the crowds. They took away typewriters and anything else they could find.

Q: There were no incidents in the Marine departure?

LEHMANN: There were no incidents, and there were no casualties of any kind throughout except the two Marines that were killed early on in the day by that direct hit which, I think, was quite an accomplishment.

The fleet did not move out. The fleet remained on station, anchored out in the South China Sea about 25 miles offshore or something like that for a number of days. They picked up additional people—Vietnamese—coming out on boats and barges. All told, about another 60,000 people came out on boats and barges while the fleet stayed out there. They were largely put on some MSTS transports that were with the fleet. I have forgotten just how

long we stayed out there. I think it was about three or four days before we sailed into Subic Bay.

Q: Wolf, I believe we've covered the entire sequence from the beginning, over a period of a month and a half to two months, up until the final arrival of yourself and Ambassador Martin and the others at the fleet. Probably, we've forgotten a few things here and there. One thing I remember, for example, that I wanted to cover and didn't and that we might clean up is how the warden system worked. We might also have another final point on the total number of people that were involved in the evacuation.

LEHMANN: The mission warden system worked pretty well. During the evacuation period, we used the Americans in the mission warden system, largely either to drive or escort buses—often to escort buses—that were bringing people from assembly points either to the embassy or to the DAO holding facilities. At the end, I mentioned earlier, at the end among the last to be evacuated were most of these American mission warden guards. Of course, the warden system also had a lot of Vietnamese guards that were under contract which, for example, provided the guards at my house, etc. On the whole it worked well. There was a fatigue factor at one point with the American mission warden guards. In fact, that played a role on the problem that arose with moving the people from the embassy to the DAO compound on Monday afternoon just before the 8:37 attack.

Q: What kind of people were these wardens? One thing that I found in a somewhat similar situation was—and I always raise this in the exercise that we hold—the importance of insuring that the wrong people were not made wardens. In other words, you have to be very careful that senior staff are not named wardens, people that would be occupied with other things. So you are trying to get people that have good heads, are stable, are not too emotional on the one hand but on the other hand also will have the time to do this and not be pulled off to do other essential jobs that are their primary responsibility.

LEHMANN: Yes, I see what you mean. Of course, the thing that I was talking about is a little bit different because these were full-time hired wardens that I was talking about. As far as the people detailed from the normal mission stand as wardens were concerned, we had that also, of course. We didn't encounter any particular difficulties on that score, but perhaps that was so in our case because it was a very large mission with an awful lot of people. We could insure that the right people were selected and there weren't these overlaps. The same kind of thing may not be true for an embassy or a mission of a much smaller size [as it was for]the immense mission that we had in Saigon.

Q: Why don't we go on now to the number of people that were involved.

LEHMANN: As to the number, we started with 5,886 U. S. Government personnel, U. S. contractors, and dependents at about the first of March of 1975. Between April 4 and April 24, we evacuated by commercial or military means a total of 27,000 people of all kinds—Vietnamese and third country nationals. Between the April 25 and early on April 29—the crucial day—in those four days we evacuated about another 27,000, mostly by military fixed-wing airlift—by far the largest number. The helicopter lifts on the April 29 and into April 30 lifted about 7,500 out of the Saigon area. After that, another 14,000—almost all Vietnamese with a few Americans—came out to the fleet by boats and barges generally in conformity with the plans for the use of boats and barges.

Q: Were these to a great extent out of MR-4?

LEHMANN: These were both MR-4 and MR-3, some from the nearby Saigon area. That made a total of 75,500 approximately evacuated under the plan, either by air or surface. In addition to those, another 60,000 Vietnamese came out to the fleet in the course of the 29th and a few days thereafter that the fleet remained anchored offshore. Those were largely by some form of surface transport—a boat or a barge, etc. Included in that number is a relatively small number, largely of Vietnamese military who came out with their own helicopters.

Q: Of course, we all know that in the years to follow enormous numbers came later, but that was a different situation. That was not a part of this final evacuation, but it was the escape after the North Vietnamese takeover had been completed.

LEHMANN: Yes, that was a completely different thing.

End of interview